

# **Organizing a Successful Family Center in Your School**

**A Resource Guide**



**Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction**



# Organizing a Successful Family Center in Your School

## A Resource Guide

Division for Libraries, Technology, and  
Community Learning



Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction



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# **Organizing a Successful Family Center in Your School**

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## **A Resource Guide**

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## Foreword

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Students who thrive in school tend to have strong families, working with teachers to support learning at home and at school. At the same time, schools that support family involvement enjoy a positive school climate, a richer school curriculum, more support from families and the community, and better teacher morale. School family centers can bring it all together.

A family center located in school sends a clear message to parents that they are very important in the education of their children. Family centers give parents the chance to feel welcome and involved in school. They provide a place for parents to meet face-to-face with staff members and other parents, forming friendly and child-centered relationships.

School family centers can be especially welcoming to families from diverse cultures and those with limited English skills. They can be a valuable tool in school efforts to close the achievement gap and raise student achievement, two priorities of our New Wisconsin Promise to ensure a quality education for every child.

I congratulate the schools that have made this commitment, setting aside space, funds, and people-power to operate family centers. The most successful centers are not elaborate or expensive, but they are welcoming places where people feel free to gather and share thoughts and ideas on parenting and learning.

I commend the members of my State Superintendent's Parent Leadership Corps who reviewed and contributed to the content of our second edition of this booklet. Corps members were also instrumental in shaping the DPI Policy on Family-School-Community Partnerships (see Appendix D) and the article, "The 10 Things Parents Want School Staff to Know," (see Appendix C).

This booklet will serve as an excellent guide for schools exploring a school family center. Planning, space and design of a family center are important, but the excitement and enthusiasm of school/family partnerships are what truly make centers powerful in the education of our children.

State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster

*The presence of parents can transform the culture of a school.*

— Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot  
Author of *The Good High School:  
Portraits of Character and Education*

## **Purpose of This Guide**

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This booklet was developed to help school staff members, parents, and community leaders understand how family centers can promote family participation and strengthen their schools. It also serves as a guide to establishing family centers.

The term, *family center*, is used throughout this booklet, although many schools prefer to call their center another name. Whatever its name, a successful family center allows families to feel a sense of ownership in the school; to feel like insiders. The family center permits school staff members and families to establish relationships, programs, and activities to help children succeed academically, emotionally, and socially. To achieve that success, parents and other community members interested in the school must help create the center. The term, *parent*, refers to any caregiver who assumes responsibility for nurturing and caring for children.

## **The Six Types of Family-School-Community Partnerships**

How a school family center is started and run reveals a great deal about the school's overall relationship with families and the community in promoting student learning. Schools with an effective program of parent involvement welcome parents and other family members as decision makers, collaborators, volunteers, communicators, instructors, and advocates in their children's learning.

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction encourages schools to use a Framework for Participation based on the Six Types of Family-School-Community Partnerships as developed by researcher Joyce Epstein. Epstein, director of the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, has found that schools reaching out to families in many ways are more likely to

- Involve more families, especially families of diverse backgrounds
- Improve the academic achievement and behavior of more students
- Enjoy greater support from parents, staff members, and the community

Following is a brief summary of The Six Types of Partnerships that any school can use to increase parent involvement. For more information, see Appendix B or visit the National Network of Partnership Schools website at [www.partnershipschools.org](http://www.partnershipschools.org).

## **SCHOOLS CAN REACH OUT TO FAMILIES IN THE FOLLOWING SIX WAYS**

**Parenting.** Build on parenting strengths and help families improve parenting skills. Facilitate support systems and networks to enable families to effectively nurture their children.

**Communicating.** Promote clear two-way communication between schools and families regarding school programs and children's progress. Communication should be to families both individually and collectively. Schools should encourage and make it easy for families to communicate to the school about their children.

**Volunteering.** Recruit and organize family and community members as volunteers. A wide variety of volunteer opportunities should be available at different times and locations to make it possible for everyone to volunteer. Volunteers should have a clear understanding of their roles and the school should recognize volunteers.

**Learning at Home.** Provide for families and school staff to work together to establish and communicate learning goals for students. Develop strategies to help families reinforce children's learning at home and in the community that support academic achievement.

**Decision making.** Enable parents to participate in making decisions about the school and children's learning. Give families opportunities to offer opinions and ideas about school programs. Schools should develop the leadership skills of parents as decision makers and advocates in the community for the education of children.

**Collaborating with the Community.** Establish partnerships with individuals and organizations in the community that support children's learning. Connect parents to resources in the school and community that strengthen families and support children's learning and development. Provide opportunities for the school and students to contribute to the community.

## **School Family Centers Support Partnerships**

Family centers send a strong message to families that they are an important part of the fabric of the school. The family center can support school efforts in all six types of partnerships. The center can be a "home base" for partnerships. The center can provide planning and storage space for the school's partnership efforts and offer families a friendly place to make contact with their school and community members.

Each school must decide how its family center can be used to encourage family-school partnerships. For example, schools in Chelsea, Massachusetts, have established parent rooms as one of several initiatives that link homes with the school system. Each school has also developed school leadership councils to offer parents many opportunities to be involved in the life of the school, from screening candidates for teaching positions to reducing truancy and dropout problems in high school.

## **What Can a Family Center Do?**

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### **A FAMILY CENTER**

- Provides parents and families with a room or space for their own use and facilitates communication between families and the school
- Provides opportunities for parents to get to know each other and network
- Offers educational and socializing opportunities
- Serves various needs of families so that parents and other adults can turn their attention to helping and supporting their children

The ideal is to have a family center in every school building. Above all, family centers help parents to feel welcome in their children's school.

Vivian Johnson, education professor at Boston University and author of "Parent Centers in Urban Schools: Four Case Studies," says that successful centers strengthen school-family relationships, and that in turn results in improved learning for children.

## **How Can a Family Center Improve Family-Community Involvement in a School?**

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### **A WELL-DESIGNED CENTER WILL**

- Make the school an accessible, safe, and friendly place for parents and community members to gather.
- Improve communication among families and between home and school.
- Promote greater multicultural understanding among the school's families.
- Demonstrate tangibly that parents are welcome at the school.
- Serve as a hub for promoting parent education by linking families with community resources and carrying out a wide range of home-school partnership activities that enhance student learning.
- Serve as the center for partnerships.
- Help develop leadership and advocacy skills and opportunities for parents.
- Coordinate parent and community volunteer services that are available to teachers and the school.

### **Making It Work**

In one school's Family Center, a variety of programs are underway to attract and keep families involved in their children's academic progress. An Action Team of teachers and parents develops and implements many programs, including:

- Workshops and related outreach activities for parents on topics such as improving their child's reading techniques and math skills.
- A monthly school activity calendar and school newsletter for families that includes parent tips, homework and study habit skills.
- A Welcome Packet for new families that includes a friendly introduction to the school, information on school programs, community resources, and specific actions parents can take to help their student succeed in school.
- A "Learning At Home" component that includes interactive homework and other curriculum-linked or enrichment activities.
- A Parent Skills Interest Survey to find out how parents would like to participate in the school.

## Who Should Participate in Establishing a Family Center?

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The initiative to set up the committee can come from the community or the school. To ensure success, those who take the initiative need to involve a cross section of the school and community, with parents having a key role.

The center has to be seen as belonging to the parents, including those parents who have not felt comfortable in school. A steering committee should represent those who will use and benefit from the center. Leadership may come from the parent-teacher organization, the school improvement team or site council, the district community education council, or the family-school-community partnership action team.

### THE COMMITTEE SHOULD INVOLVE AND SEEK INPUT FROM

- Parents and other family members representing the school's cultural and racial diversity
- Teachers
- The principal, assistant principal, or other administrative staff
- Pupil services staff members
- Other school staff members, especially the custodian, secretaries, and counselors
- Government and agency representatives
- Business and community leaders
- Representatives of community and faith-based organizations
- Health care providers
- Existing family centers in the community and agencies that provide parenting information and classes
- The school and public library staff
- Students
- Senior citizens

#### Making It Work

*As for getting people involved in the Center? It's always good to start with a celebration put on by the kids (maybe a musical) and offer free food. Hold the opening event at dinnertime so families don't need to worry about making supper. The opening event will also be an introduction to the Center and an invitation to all.*

*Before you open the Center, a survey should go out. Getting family input is important if we're working on community building. Send home a survey on what families want from the Center. Gather as many ideas as possible.*

*After publicizing the survey results, hold a grand opening celebration. A letter of invitation can be sent to all school families and community partners that promotes the Center's mission and features.*

Mandy Mabbott, VISTA  
Webster-Stanley Elementary School  
Oshkosh School District

## **What Are the Tasks of the Steering Committee?**

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### **Establish the Center**

- Decide on its purpose and goals.
- Conduct a needs assessment. (Note: The perspectives of the community, teachers, parents, and students, especially secondary students, are important.)
- Locate a site.
- Identify staffing and funding resources.

### **Coordinate Center Activities**

- Use data from the needs assessment to establish a budget and plan activities.
- How will center activities help advance school learning goals? Link activities to school goals and to other events and resources in the school and community.
- Serve as or help form an ongoing advisory board to center staff.
- Publicize the center's activities and accomplishments to gain sustained support.
- Identify strategies for fund-raising to support center activities.

### **Evaluate Center Activities and Accomplishments**

- Evaluate accomplishment of goals and effectiveness of center activities.
- Ensure responsiveness to all segments of the parent group.

## Where Should the Family Center Be Located?

Once the school or school district is committed to establishing a family center and has determined its primary purpose, the next task is to select the site. Ideally, the family center should be located in a central, easy-to-reach location in the school building. A visible location with high-traffic flow, such as close to the principal's office, library, or cafeteria, will send a strong message that the family center is an important part of the school.

Every attempt should be made to secure such a room. Many schools are overcrowded, however, and may need to locate the family center in another space, including

- A corner of the library, cafeteria, or gymnasium.
- An office adjacent to a classroom or next to the principal's office.
- A supply room
- A nook in the school atrium or entrance area.

If a less central location for the family center is not possible, post prominent signs at all school entrances to make visitors aware of and direct them to the center. If space cannot be found on the school campus, a location in a nearby public

facility is better than no space at all (Johnson, 1992). Convenient parking spaces should be available for visitors, no matter where the center is located.

If the family center will serve more than one school, a larger facility may be necessary. For example, one school district chose a vacant school. Because of the ample space available, each room in the center serves a different function: an instructional room for workshops; a production room for making games and preparing learning activities to take home; a library and book-exchange room; a filmstrip and video center; a learning games center; a toy-exchange room; a child-care room; a carpentry center; and storage areas.

Ample space is ideal but may not be available to many schools and school districts. Rather than not have a center, the steering committee can come up with an interim location. Some schools have found that the space they thought was perfect did not work well, and have had to find another space that better met their needs.

### Making It Work

*We are very limited when it comes to space, so our shelving, table, and chairs are located in the hallway near the school entrance. This is a good place because parents who are waiting to pick up their children can look over materials as they wait.*

*The furniture and some materials were funded with a grant. Other materials are donated, sometimes by parents and school staff. For example, I donate a subscription to a parenting magazine.*

Maureen Hauswald, Principal  
Castle Rock Elementary School  
Adams-Friendship School District

## **Funding Your School Family Center**

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Schools can tap a variety of funding sources to cover the cost of operating, supplying, and staffing a family center. Consider federal and local sources of funding, as well as donations and in-kind contributions.

### **Federal Funds**

#### **TITLE I**

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was passed to help schools close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers. NCLB gives schools specific authority to use Title I funds for parent involvement efforts aimed at improving student achievement. In fact, districts receiving more than \$500,000 in Title I funds must use at least one percent of those funds for parent involvement activities.

In addition, schools receiving Title I funds must build school capacity for parent involvement. For example, the NCLB specifically requires schools to provide parents with materials and training to improve their children's achievement, such as literacy training and use of technology.

Visible and welcoming school family centers are not only an ideal *place* to offer such materials, but also provide a great *space* for parents, school staff, and community members to meet and conduct other effective practices recommended by the NCLB:

- Involve parents in developing training for teachers, principals, and other educators.
- Provide literacy training for parents
- Provide child care for parents attending meetings or volunteering at school
- Train parents to involve other parents.
- Arrange parent-teacher meetings at various times in school
- Establish a district parent advisory council
- Involve community-based organizations and businesses in parent involvement activities
- Provide full opportunity for the participation of parents with limited English proficiency, disabilities, and those who are migrants, in languages they can understand.

## 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTER GRANTS

Community learning centers are operating in over 100 sites in Wisconsin schools and districts to provide after-school activities that support student learning. Schools receiving CLC grants must have at least 40 percent of their students qualify for free or reduced-price school lunch.

In addition to promoting parent involvement and family literacy, centers provide remedial education focused on reading and math, as well as academic enrichment programs and recreational activities. Many centers collaborate with community-based organizations to provide activities.

Although the availability of federal Title IV funding to open new centers is tightening, districts with existing community learning centers may want to consider how their school family center can be used – and strengthened with CLC funds – to promote student achievement, parent involvement, and family literacy.

For more information about CLC programs in Wisconsin schools, visit the DPI website at <http://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/clc.html>.

### Local School and Community Funds

Community groups, businesses, and service clubs can be a valuable source of funding and support for school family centers. Many school parent-teacher groups sponsor fundraisers for the family center. Invite school parent-teacher groups and community groups to conduct activities or meetings in the family center to build awareness of and support for it.

Also consider grants from local foundations, charitable organizations, or businesses. Use the expertise of parents, staff members, social service agency staff, and business and community members with some experience in grant-writing – or a willingness to learn how – to contribute their time and effort. Be sure to recognize such efforts!

#### Key Point

*A family center does not need a large budget to get started. What is more important is a firm commitment to the idea and a willingness to explore all possible sources of support.*

#### Making It Work

*Our Parent Center is funded by an annual PTO fundraiser selling pizzas, desserts, candy, etc. We adopted the room, furniture, and many supplies after the school's art program was cut several years ago. Parents often gather in the center after they drop off their children at school. Over a cup of coffee they discuss future Family Nights or projects they want to see started.*

*Our Center has parenting materials in English and Spanish. It also offers free classes to help parents learn English, sewing, and crafts, to name a few.*

Erin Weston, VISTA Volunteer  
Forest Home Avenue Elementary  
School, Milwaukee

## How do schools fund partnership efforts?

In a survey by the National Network of Partnership Schools, school and district staff said they funded their ongoing partnership efforts, including family center operations, with the sources listed below. Consider these sources when seeking family center funds.

### MAJOR SOURCES OF FUNDING

Americorps/VISTA  
Bilingual Education  
Drug Prevention  
Even Start  
General funds  
Principal's or Superintendent's  
discretionary funds  
PTA/PTO  
School Board  
Special Education  
State Compensatory Education  
Title I  
Title VI  
Title VII  
American Legion Partnership

Corporate sponsors  
Danforth Foundation  
Donations from community  
FAST grants  
Grants from school districts  
Healthy Start  
School fund raising activities  
Volunteer (in-kind funds)  
CESA  
Community Education funds  
Family Preservation grant  
Private businesses in communities  
Rockefeller Foundation  
United Way  
Other Sources of Funding

## How Should the Family Center Be Equipped?

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After selecting the location of the family center, the next step is obtaining furnishings. The size of the center's space, the purposes, and activities of the center, and the resources available will determine the equipment, furniture, and materials needed.

Donations are likely to play a key role. Make a wish list and share it with parents, social clubs, churches, and businesses. You may be surprised at the nearly-new items some people have in their attics and are willing to donate.

### **START WITH BASIC EQUIPMENT AND SUPPLIES, SUCH AS**

- A sofa, and adult- and child-sized chairs, tables, and desks
- Bookcases, file cabinets, and storage cupboards
- Coffeepot, teapot, and ample supplies of coffee and tea
- A popcorn popper
- A telephone and answering machine or voice mail
- Library with books that reflect the parents' languages and cultures
- Supplies for making learning games
- Newspapers and magazines
- Supplies for children (for example, games, puzzles, and toys)
- Brochures about the family center and other community resources for families
- Typewriters and computers

### **Making It Work**

*We have various parenting books, print materials that give parents ideas about how to help their children learn at home, and education games and manipulatives.*

Clarice M. Nestingen, Principal  
Coon Valley Elementary School  
Westby Area School District

### **AS THE CENTER GROWS AND BECOMES BETTER ESTABLISHED, ADDITIONAL EQUIPMENT MAY BE ACQUIRED. EXAMPLES INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING**

- Computers with Internet access for personal use or for use in adult computer classes
- A refrigerator and microwave oven
- A recycling box for clothing, shoes, and household items
- A food closet
- A television, VCR/DVD, and video library
- Toy-lending library
- Dictionaries, pencils, and other school supplies to give to students in need
- Partitions to ensure privacy for counseling areas
- Additional telephones
- Cassette recorders and tapes, camcorder
- Laminating machine
- Copy machine
- Building and gardening supplies
- Bus passes

## **Who Should Staff the Family Center?**

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Family center staff are the “heartbeat” of your family center. The parent who arrives at a dark, empty room will feel much different than the parent greeted by a warm smile and a hot cup of coffee.

Volunteers or paid employees can staff the family center. School or district employees who staff family centers include instructional aides, community liaisons, or others focused on promoting family involvement. Roles and responsibilities should be clearly defined.

The most important task of center staff is to coordinate center activities, publicity, and outreach to families. Because center staff act as a school-community link, they must be knowledgeable about school and community functions and should be respected by families and school staff members alike.

If the center serves culturally-diverse families, consider having multiple coordinators who reflect that diversity and can communicate with parents in their own languages. If funds are not available to pay more than one coordinator, recruit volunteers representative of your school community to assist the coordinator.

Depending upon your school’s need, staff responsibilities may include the following:

### **Planning**

- Keep the center to be open and accessible, at a minimum, whenever the school is open.
- Meet regularly with parents and the advisory committee to plan and coordinate center activities.
- Order, collect, and organize supplies, equipment, and parent resources such as clothing, food, learning materials, games, and toys that reflect the needs and diversity of the community.
- Meet with agency representatives to facilitate interagency collaboration and referral services.
- Provide interpreters and translators.
- Organize child care and transportation.
- Assess the needs of parents and school staff members on a regular basis.

### **Implementing**

- Recruit, train, and supervise volunteers for the center and for school activities.
- Coordinate fund-raising and other financial support for the center.
- Help facilitate communication among school staff members and families.
- Publicize center activities to parents, school staff members, and the community at large.
- Arrange for parent-student-teacher meetings.
- Interpret and translate workshops and materials into the languages spoken by parents, so they can participate fully in center activities.
- Recruit adult educators, teachers, and speakers for classes and workshops.
- Represent the center at meetings of the faculty and other school governance groups.

## **Evaluating**

- Keep records of center activities and a roster of participants.
- Ensure that all families feel welcome and are able to participate.
- Recognize and reward parents, teachers, and the community for their participation and contributions.
- Help evaluate the effectiveness of each activity.

## **Creating Community Links**

Linking with colleges and universities, adult education centers, community agencies, and businesses can create opportunities to expand the center's staff. Adult education centers will often pay for a teacher to conduct a GED program or English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes if class space is provided by the school and 20 to 25 participants can be recruited. Social service agencies may provide counseling if space at the family center is designated for that purpose. Business and other community organizations may provide volunteers or speakers for workshops. And if parents and other family members are asked specifically, they will often reveal special skills they can contribute.

## What Activities Should the Family Center Offer?

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Survey parents and school staff members to identify activities that should be given priority during the family center's early stages. As the center becomes more firmly established, however, the imagination and creativity of its participants will help bring the center to its full potential.

Start with activities that have a high priority and that support school learning goals. Carefully plan and conduct only a few activities at a time. Starting the center out with a few successful activities will lay the groundwork for more well-attended events and will build support needed to sustain the center.

Initially, participation may be low, but don't be discouraged. It will take time and continued effort to inform parents and families about the center and draw them to its activities. If possible, plan a kickoff event that will attract a crowd to the center's first activity.

Keep teachers and other staff involved in planning center activities and informed of the center's progress well before the center opens. Teachers will play a key role in recruiting and referring parents to the center.

### CONSIDER USING THE FAMILY CENTER AS A PLACE TO

- Conduct parent and family workshops linked to school goals, such as help with homework, family reading, math, science, and art.
- Conduct parent-child activities for the after-school program.
- Organize make-it-and-take-it sessions to create learning materials for use at home.
- Offer adult education programs, such as adult literacy, ESL or GED classes, computer/word-processing classes, financial planning, and consumer education.
- Organize parenting classes appropriate to participants' ages and cultural backgrounds; positive parenting or parent effectiveness training; child abuse prevention; and alcohol and other drug abuse prevention.
- Plan cultural and social activities for the school and community.
- Plan family sports activities such as softball and volleyball.
- Develop a lending library of resources for parents.
- Develop a toy-lending library.
- Provide tutorial classes that parents and students attend together.
- Facilitate parent-teacher conferences.
- Refer participants to appropriate community agencies.
- Train classroom, school, and center volunteers.
- Reach out to families through telephone trees, home visits, and a family center newsletter.

#### **Making It Work**

*Families should determine by majority the best times for the center to be open, and what they need or want from it. Also, try to hold events, guest speakers, and potlucks throughout the year so there are always things going on. Be sure to send families reminders of events. Also always make sure things are translated into the languages of all families in the school.*

Mandy Mabbott, VISTA  
Webster-Stanley Elementary  
Oshkosh School District

- Establish information and homework hotlines.
- Train parents in methods of observing classrooms and supporting classroom observations.
- Train new members of school-site councils and other advisory or decision-making groups for their roles.
- Schedule teacher planning time on a weekly or monthly basis.

## How Can the Family Center Maintain Interest and Expand Participation?

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Once a center has been established, strategies should be developed for maintaining interest and extending the center's outreach efforts. At the beginning of the school year, remind the faculty of the center's services and encourage teachers to use the center. For example, during parent-teacher conferences, teachers can refer parents to the center to obtain recommended materials for helping their children (Buckley, et al., 1991).

### **FOLLOWING, ARE OTHER STRATEGIES TO MAINTAIN INTEREST AND EXPAND PARTICIPATION.**

#### **Publicity**

- Publish a calendar of upcoming events; follow up with fliers and announcements.
- Include the family center on school tours for back-to-school night and new families.
- Locate refreshments for the school open house in the center.
- Invite the school board to hold a committee meeting in the family center.
- Use newsletters and other publicity tools that cover events and feature the work of parents and children.
- Share parent testimonials about the center's activities and the benefits of participating.
- Notify local media — television, radio, and newspaper — about upcoming activities and events.
- Maintain telephone trees conducted in the languages needed to serve all families.

#### **Making It Work**

*Knocking on the door of a large foundation is good, but going straight to the community for assistance should be a first step for school family centers. Encourage your school's VISTA or another volunteer to network with the community and local businesses to form relationships and get support. Businesses are often generous with their cash or in-kind donations.*

*Form a public relations team to promote the Center's needs to the community whether they are used furniture, a coffeemaker, or good attendance at your next event. Use fliers, emails, signs, and other ways to communicate what you need.*

*Within the school, feature service learning projects at the family center for kids and family members to learn together. Ask your school's parent group to meet at the center and to host a fundraiser for needed items.*

Mandy M. Mabbott, VISTA  
Webster Stanley Elementary School  
Oshkosh School District

#### **BE ESSENTIAL**

- As with all joint parent-teacher efforts, keep the learning and developmental needs of children at the center of planned activities.
- Provide a wide variety of resources that meet families' needs, such as food, clothing, household items, job searches, counseling, medical services, and so forth.
- Hold tutoring, mentoring, or after-school activities in the center.

**RECOGNIZE AND CELEBRATE!**

- Give awards, prizes, and recognition to families who contribute and participate.
- Schedule social events and celebrations, as well as workshops and classes.
- Make interpreters and materials available in families' own languages.
- Arrange for child care and transportation.

**THE BENEFITS OF SHARED OWNERSHIP**

- Offer workshops, programs, and services that parents want, that parents are given a voice in organizing and conducting, and that respond to families' needs.
- Visit homes to share information about the center with families who may be reluctant to come to the center.
- Involve children in publicizing and conducting programs.
- Feature meaningful activities that show parents how they contribute to their children's learning and to the quality of school life.
- Invite community groups to use and support the center as a way to advance the important mission of schools.

## **How Can Parents Be Involved in the Family Center?**

Parents should be involved from the start in planning, running, and promoting the center. A parent-driven center will make attracting participants and support much easier and help the school reach its goals. Parents can be involved in the family center:

### **AS DECISION MAKERS WHO**

- Serve on the steering committee to guide establishment and operation of the center
- Offer the parent perspective on school issues
- Help school staff understand families' questions and concerns about children's learning and development.

### **AS COLLABORATORS WHO**

- Work to promote center activities and goals among families and in the community
- Create opportunities for families to become involved in the school, learn about school programs, and support children's learning
- Identify activities and events at the center that link home and school learning.
- Serve on other school committees and connect other school activities to the center.

### **AS VOLUNTEERS WHO**

- Work one-on-one with children in the center to help and listen to them
- Assist teachers and other school staff assemble learning materials and organize events
- Identify community contacts and resources for use and support of the center
- Help staff, organize, and supply the center.

### **AS COMMUNICATORS WHO**

- Help the center design clear, usable materials for families, including families who do not speak or read English well
- Network with families to explain and promote center activities
- Help design and respond to parent surveys that identify families' needs
- Collect information from families about what they need and how the center can help meet those needs

### **AS TRAINERS WHO**

- Train parents to meaningfully participate in school programs and decision making
- Train staff to work with parents on all levels
- Help build trusting relationships among families, students, and school staff

**AS PARENTS WHO**

- Provide important information about their child away from school – his experiences, hobbies, strengths, and temperament
- Bring their questions and concerns to the attention of school staff
- Evaluate and offer feedback on center activities involving their child
- Carry out learning activities with their child at home
- Possess the deepest interest in the well-being and success of their child.

Ask parents what the center can do to help them, their child, and their family. Ask parents how they want to be involved and for ideas about how to involve others in the center.

## **How Should the Family Center Be Evaluated?**

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Evaluating the family center's effectiveness is an important component of center operations from the beginning. Evaluation data can play a critical role in sustaining both financial and human support for the center. Work with a school district or government program evaluator during the initial planning phase to establish a good record-keeping system. Data collection need not be an onerous task when record-keeping systems are established from the start.

The effectiveness of center activities can be measured before, during, or after the activities to strengthen their impact. For example, the effectiveness of a series of parent workshops on how to help children with homework can be evaluated while the series is still in progress. School staff can collect data on homework grades and the rate of homework completion both during and after the workshops for children whose parents attend the workshops. That information will indicate whether the series is meeting its objectives. Using the data to improve the series while still in session will benefit workshop participants.

Collecting the following data can be valuable in evaluating family center efforts.

### **Levels of Participation**

- Number of participants using the center.
- Number of parents enrolled in classes (in parenting workshops, as well as adult education classes).
- Regularity of participants' attendance in classes.
- Number of volunteers.
- Number of parent contacts made via telephone or home visits.
- Number of requests for services.
- Number of referrals to the center by teachers, counselors, administrators, and community organizations.
- Oral and written comments from participants, school staff members, and the community.

### **Information about Activities**

- Written evaluations of all classes, workshops, and activities.
- Observations of center activities by parents, school personnel, and district personnel.
- Documenting, including photos and videos, the number and diversity of activities.
- Recording the use of selected resources, such as the clothing box, the lending library, and the make-it-and-take-it corner.
- Before-and-after assessments of children's learning for specific kinds of activities and workshops, such as family math or family reading.
- Copies of newspaper articles and other media coverage.

## **Information about Participants**

- Do parents and other family members feel comfortable and welcome at the center?
- Do families of all backgrounds feel equally welcome and comfortable?
- How do male and female participation compare (numbers and extent of participation)?
- Has participating in center activities helped parents support their children's learning?
- Have center activities encouraged parents to learn about the school's functions or other topics of interest?
- Are center activities meeting parents' needs?
- Are outreach efforts drawing more families to center activities?
- Are teachers well-informed about center activities? Do they refer parents to the center and participate themselves?
- Do center activities enhance student learning?
- Is the publicity for center activities adequate and timely?
- Is the center helping to increase parent and community involvement in other aspects of school life? For example, how does the center increase the number and diversity of classroom volunteers, participants at open house and parent-teacher conferences, and family representation on school site councils and advisory committees?
- Are appropriate materials and supplies available? Are they used?
- Is the center linking parents and families with other community agencies and resources?

## **Addressing Challenges and Barriers**

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Commitment and perseverance will be needed to overcome the challenges that arise.

### **STRATEGIES THAT MAY HELP OVERCOME PROBLEMS INCLUDE**

- Plan big but start small. Be sure that the first activities can be completed successfully to ensure that the center will gain an excellent reputation from the start.
- Break down complex tasks and projects into small pieces and involve as many people as possible in carrying them out.
- Build support by sharing small successes and accomplishments.
- Inform all parties of problems as well as successes.
- Thank and give credit to others for the success of the center.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- Target specific activities and programs. Don't try to reach everyone at one time.
- Visit other family centers to see how they work.
- Publicize center events more than you think necessary. There can never be too many notices, phone calls, or messages about center activities.
- Ask parents and school staff members for feedback regularly (formally and informally). Listen and respond to what they say.
- Insist on training center staff and parent volunteers to prepare them for their roles as managers and coordinators of center activities.
- Videotape center activities, an exciting way to "tell the story" and carry the message into families' homes.
- Involve children in center activities. Families will come when their children are part of the action.
- Focus at first on activities that help parents support their children's learning. Surveys indicate that such activities are what parents are most interested in.
- Provide materials and programs in the languages parents can understand.
- Address conflicts and controversies as they arise. Get help from community mediation services if necessary. Identify common goals and needs and work from there to find solutions.
- Expand and revitalize the membership of the steering committee to maintain a high level of commitment. Invite potential sponsors to join the committee.
- Share the problems and accomplishments of the center regularly with parents, school staff, and the community. Ask for their ideas and suggestions.
- Evaluate the center regularly to become aware of its strengths and weaknesses.
- Have fun and celebrate accomplishments!

## **Key Points for a Successful Family Center**

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### **FACTORS ESSENTIAL TO ORGANIZING AND MAINTAINING SUCCESSFUL FAMILY CENTERS INCLUDE**

- Everyone, including families, school staff members, and the community, should benefit from the existence of a family center.
- Gather and consider from the start many perspectives from parents, school staff, and community members to engender a sense of common ownership.
- Set a timeline, assign tasks and responsibilities, and maintain momentum.
- Wherever the family center is located, it must be perceived as an accessible and safe place to go. The center should offer a welcoming and friendly atmosphere where parents can relax, visit with other parents and staff members, and obtain help and services that will meet their families' needs.
- A family center does not need a large budget to get started. What's more important is a firm commitment to the idea and a willingness to explore all possible sources of support.
- Give participants primary responsibility for decorating, furnishing, and supplying the family center so they can take pride in the center and feel at home there.
- The successful functioning of a family center depends on selecting and training effective staff who have the support and encouragement of school administrators.
- Families and school staff members will support the center if the activities meet parents' needs and if teachers perceive that the center is enhancing children's learning.
- Centers successful in involving diverse families are caring and inviting places that meet families' needs.
- From the beginning, set clear objectives and plan to evaluate the center.

## **Appendixes**

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- A. *Web Resources for School Family Centers*
- B. *Schools that Say, “Welcome!”*
- C. *Ten Things Parents Want School Staff to Know*
- D. *DPI Policy on Family-School-Community Partnerships*
- E. *Measuring Your Family-School-Community Partnerships*

## **Web Resources for School Family Centers**

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### **Fundraising and School Grants**

#### **Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction**

The DPI's Grants and Financial Assistance webpage offers information about state and federal education and library funds that are available through the DPI. Links are provided to pages with grant details, special requirements, and contact information.

**<http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/grants.html>**

#### **U.S. Department of Education**

The U.S. government's official education Web site contains a wealth of information--from funding opportunities to research and statistics. **[www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov)**

#### **eSchool News**

eSchool News is a monthly print newspaper with a companion Web site ([www.eschoolnews.org](http://www.eschoolnews.org)). Both provide news and information to help K-20 decision makers use technology and the Internet to improve schools. **[www.eschoolnews.org](http://www.eschoolnews.org)**

#### **SchoolGrants**

SchoolGrants provides a one-stop resource for K-12 schools. The site includes upcoming grant opportunities, samples of successful proposals, grant-writing and fund-raising tips, and worksheets to make management of grants and grant opportunities easier. **[www.schoolgrants.org](http://www.schoolgrants.org)**

#### **Technology & Learning Magazine: Grants and Contests**

Search for ways to get money to fund technology in your school on this website. Browse all the grants at once, or search by keyword or other criteria. There are keyword search options, grant application deadlines, and brief descriptions for over 100 grant opportunities. **[www.techlearning.com/grants.html](http://www.techlearning.com/grants.html)**

#### **The Foundation Center**

The Foundation Center is an independent nonprofit organization established by foundations to increase public understanding of the foundation field. The site lists resources for grant seekers, including upcoming grant opportunities, grant writing tips, workshops, and links to foundations. **[www.fdncenter.org](http://www.fdncenter.org)**

### **High School Family Centers**

High School Family Centers, Institute for Responsive Education, Boston:  
**[www.responsiveeducation.org/pdf/familycenterPrelim.pdf](http://www.responsiveeducation.org/pdf/familycenterPrelim.pdf)**

## Family-School-Community Partnerships

### **Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction:**

**[www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dltcl/bbfcsp/index.html](http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dltcl/bbfcsp/index.html)**. The website of the DPI Bright Beginnings/Family-School-Community Partnerships Team. Information about what Wisconsin schools and parents are doing to promote effective family-school-community partnerships.

### **National Network of Partnership Schools:**

**[www.partnershipschools.org](http://www.partnershipschools.org)**. offers a wealth of information and ideas to help schools establish long-lasting, comprehensive, and well-planned parent involvement practices based on educational research. Directed by Dr. Joyce Epstein.

**Southwest Educational Development Laboratory: [www.sedl.org](http://www.sedl.org)**. Click on “our Work,” then “Focus Areas” for publications and resources for involving families in student learning.

**U.S. Department of Education: [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov)**. Lots of information for parents to help their child do well in school and to learn about parent involvement opportunities schools offer, including information about No Child Left Behind Act.

**National Education Association: [www.nea.org](http://www.nea.org)**. Click on Parents and Community.”

**National PTA (National Congress of Parents and Teachers): [www.pta.org](http://www.pta.org)**. Click on “parent involvement.”

### **National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education:**

**[www.ncpie.org](http://www.ncpie.org)**. offers extensive information on building parent-school partnerships that improve children’s learning.

**Connect for Kids: [www.connectforkids.org](http://www.connectforkids.org)**. This on-line publication offers tools and information to work on behalf of children, youth and families.

**The Learning First Alliance: [www.learningfirst.org](http://www.learningfirst.org)**. Click on “Resources for Parents.”

### **Family Involvement Network of Researchers (FINE):**

**[www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine.html)**. Research-based information and resources promoting strong partnerships between children's educators, their families, and their communities. Sponsored by the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

## Schools that Say, “Welcome!”

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### A Discussion Activity

Schools can welcome families and establish warm, positive relationships with them in many ways. Think about how your school works with families to strengthen children’s learning.

**READ AND MARK EACH STATEMENT BELOW. COMPARE AND DISCUSS THE RESULTS.**

+ + = **Always**  
 + = **Almost always**  
 √ = **Sometimes**  
 O = **Needs much improvement**

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Office staff are friendly and courteous to parents and other visitors on the phone and in person.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Parents are invited to complete school surveys about their needs in helping their child learn.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ A welcome sign and school map are displayed near the school entrance.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ The school has a family center or another place where information about children’s learning, school programs, and community resources are easily available.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ The school offers an orientation program for incoming students and families new to the district.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ The school offers informal events and opportunities throughout the school year for families and staff to get to know one another.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ The principal is open, flexible, and easily accessible to families who want to talk with him or her.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ School staff communicate with families often and in many different ways, including written notices, e-mails, phone calls, and face-to-face.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ A suggestion box is visible and placed near the school entrance for families, students, and staff to contribute ideas.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ Families can visit their children’s classrooms during the day.
11. \_\_\_\_\_ Community groups are welcome to use the school building.
12. \_\_\_\_\_ Translators are available for families with limited English skills to help them participate in activities and answer questions about their child’s learning.
13. \_\_\_\_\_ Parents know which staff to contact with concerns about their child -- including teachers, other school staff, and principal – and know how to contact them.

14. \_\_\_\_\_ Families representing all students are invited to serve on school committees and help make decisions about school programs and events.
15. \_\_\_\_\_ Family members have a wide variety of opportunities to volunteer in and outside of school.
16. \_\_\_\_\_ Family members who volunteer feel appreciated and recognized by the school.
17. \_\_\_\_\_ The school website keeps parents informed about daily homework assignments, upcoming school events, and opportunities to comment or contribute ideas.
18. \_\_\_\_\_ Families can post announcements and news on a bulletin board in a central location.
19. \_\_\_\_\_ School staff respond promptly and courteously to parent phone calls and requests.
20. \_\_\_\_\_ Teachers invite parents to share their observations and ideas about their child and how she learns best.
21. \_\_\_\_\_ Parents are invited to bring the whole family to learning nights and other school events.
22. \_\_\_\_\_ Families know the school's expectations for student behavior and academic performance.

## Involving Parents

### **Ten Things Parents Want to School Staff to Know**

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From State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster's Parent Leadership Corps

November 2004

1. Parents want to know that **they are important to their children's school success** and are their children's first and most influential teachers.
2. Parents want to **feel welcome in the school building** to talk with teachers or the principal, visit their child's classroom, or to be involved however and whenever they can be.
3. Parents want to know that **they have the right to ask questions** of and request information about their child's learning from school board members, administrators, teachers, and other school staff.
4. Parents want to know **the "chain of command" in schools**, or the process for expressing concerns and requesting action. They need to be informed about "how the system works."
5. Parents want school staff to know that **they are invited to express ideas and opinions in many ways**. For example, some parents feel comfortable writing their responses to surveys, evaluations, or questionnaires. Others are more comfortable talking or speaking with the help of a translator.
6. Parents want to know **why the school or their child's teacher is asking them to do something**, i.e., to take a survey or to attend a meeting. They want to know what difference their involvement makes and how it connects to their child's learning.
7. Parents want **the school to provide clear, concise information** about their child's learning that is easily accessible and understandable to all. Parents need to be able to say that they do not understand something, whether it is a new concept or an unfamiliar language, and to know who can help them understand.
8. Parents want to **know how to be involved and how to contribute** to their child's learning. Children benefit most when parents know specific actions or practices they can do at home or in the community to help their child.
9. Parents want to know **how to represent other parents**. If schools want parent leaders to serve, schools need to train and support them.
10. Parents want school staff to recognize that **every parent has strengths and abilities** that benefit their children. Regardless of circumstance, parents can and do contribute in many ways to their child's learning.

## **Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction**

### **Policy on Family-School-Community Partnerships**

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The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) recognizes that parents and families are a child's first and most important teachers. When children enter school, the responsibility for their learning is shared by the schools, families, communities, and the children themselves.

#### **FURTHER, THE DPI BELIEVES THAT**

- All children deserve to grow up in nurturing, healthy, and safe learning environments in which families are supported in their roles and responsibilities;
- Families of all cultures, languages, and incomes care deeply about their children's success; and
- Family-school-community collaboration and partnerships benefit all children.

#### **SUCCESSFUL FAMILY-SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING GOALS**

- Communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful.
- Responsible parenting, quality teaching, and caring communities are promoted and supported.
- Families and the community play a key role in helping students learn.
- School staff provide a welcoming environment for parents and other community members and seek their support.
- Parents participate in advocacy and decisions, including budget and curriculum, that affect children and families at the local, district, and state levels.
- Community resources are made available to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning, and community partners participate in helping schools meet their learning goals.

To meet its mission that all school-age children have access to quality educational programs that meet high standards of excellence, the DPI provides leadership and resources to enable communities, schools, and families, including students, to work as knowledgeable partners.

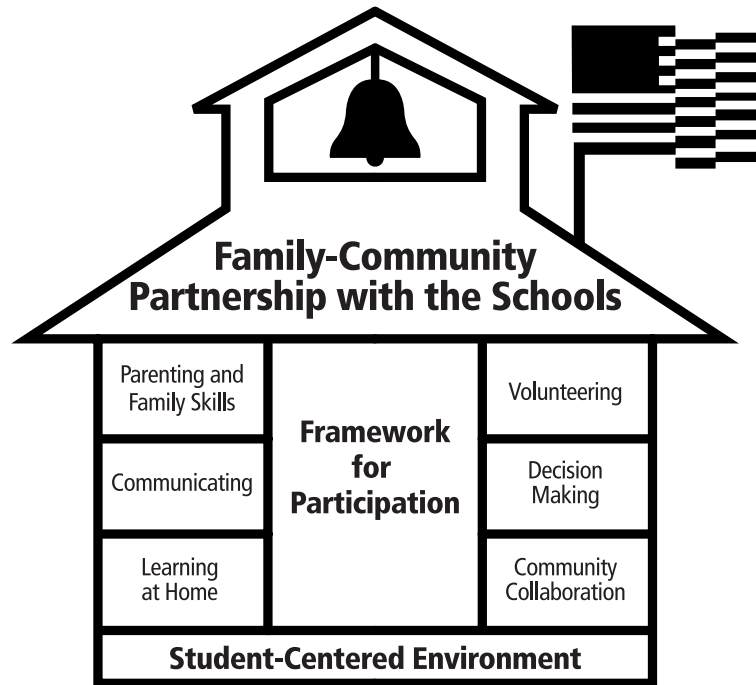
#### **THEREFORE, THE DPI**

- Educates and expects its staff to promote family-school-community partnerships and community collaborations;
- Is responsive to parents and other citizens who contact the DPI for help or to offer suggestions;
- Encourages school leaders to create a respectful, safe, and caring school climate welcoming family and community participation;
- Promotes and supports education and training for educators, families, and other citizens to develop and maintain partnerships and collaborations for life-long learning; and
- Promotes schools and communities that work together to improve student learning and citizenship development.

4-28-04

# Measuring Your Family-School-Community Partnerships

## A Tool for Schools



How does your school reach out to and involve families and the community in children’s learning? This tool is based on the Six Types of Partnerships. It can help your school

- Assess the strength of the partnerships it conducts,
- Indicate the focus or direction of your partnerships, and
- Identify areas that can be changed.

Your school may do all, some, or none of the activities or approaches listed. Not every activity is appropriate for every grade level. The items listed were selected because they show that schools in which they happen are meeting the challenge to involve families in many different ways. These activities can improve school climate, strengthen families, and increase student learning.

Your school may also be conducting other activities. Be sure to add them under each type of involvement and include them in your school’s assessment of its key partnership practices.

**DIRECTIONS:** Review the rating scale that follows. For each item, write the rating number that comes closest to describing your school. Practices that are strong and prominent will receive a score of 4. Practices rated 1, 2, or 3 are not yet part of the school’s program or need improvement.

After rating your school partnership practices, use the three Discussion Questions on the back page to assess the strengths, goals, and direction of your school partnerships for the next one to three years. Ask the members of your school Partnership Action Team or another parent-teacher decision-making group to participate in this process.

### Rating Scale

1. **Never.** This strategy does not happen at our school.
2. **Rarely.** Happens in only one or two classrooms or classes. Receives isolated use or little time. Clearly not emphasized in the school’s parent involvement plan.
3. **Sometimes.** Happens in some classes. Receives minimal or modest time or emphasis across grades. Included in, but not a notable part, of the school’s parent involvement plan.
4. **Frequently.** Happens in most or all classes or grade levels. Receives substantial time and emphasis. An important part of the school’s parent involvement plan.

## 1. Parenting and Family Skills

Schools can help families build on their strengths and parenting skills. Schools can identify resources and support to help families nurture children. Please rate using the scale on the right.

### Rating Scale

1. Never
2. Rarely
3. Sometimes
4. Frequently

#### Our School

- \_\_\_ Offers workshops and information for parents on child and adolescent development.
- \_\_\_ Reaches all families who want or need parenting information or assistance, not just the few who can attend meetings at school.
- \_\_\_ Makes sure that information for families is clear, usable, offered in a variety of ways and languages, and linked to children's learning.
- \_\_\_ Surveys families about the topics and issues they want information on.
- \_\_\_ Asks families about their children's strengths, goals, and learning styles.
- \_\_\_ Gives parents ideas and information on creating a "learning-friendly" environment at home.
- \_\_\_ Offers opportunities for parents to meet, network, and share parenting ideas.

#### Other Parenting and Family Skills Efforts

## 2. Communicating

Schools can plan and conduct workable methods of two-way communication—from school to home and from home to school. Communications, whether to groups or individual families, should focus on the child's learning. *Please rate using the above scale.*

#### Our School

- \_\_\_ Schedules parent-teacher-student conferences to monitor student progress at times convenient for parents.
- \_\_\_ Informs parents how and when they can reach teachers during and beyond the school day to talk about their child's learning.
- \_\_\_ Provides ways for parents to comment on school programs and activities, such as surveys, e-mail, comment forms, and others.
- \_\_\_ Develops ways to communicate with parents who do not speak or read English well, including providing translators and videotaped messages.

- \_\_\_ Provides parents with clear, regular information about children's progress, including information on testing, report cards, and the curriculum.
- \_\_\_ Convenes teachers and support staff to meet with and listen to parents of children with academic or behavior concerns.
- \_\_\_ Trains school staff on the value of and need for building effective ties with parents and the community.
- \_\_\_ Conducts these activities that research has shown improve children's learning:
  - (a) Sponsors orientations for families new to the school
  - (b) Produces a regular school or district newsletter
  - (c) Sends home weekly folders of students' work
  - (d) Staff makes home visits
- \_\_\_ Builds policies that encourage teachers to communicate frequently with parents about the curriculum, homework expectations, and how parents can help.

#### Other Communicating Activities

## 3. Learning at Home

Provide ways for families and school staff to, together, develop learning goals and continue children's learning at home and in the community to meet the goals. *Please rate using the above scale.*

#### Our School

- \_\_\_ Gives families information about how to keep track of, discuss, and support schoolwork at home.
- \_\_\_ Gives families information about skills required for their children in each subject.
- \_\_\_ Gives families information about how to help their children in areas that need improvement.
- \_\_\_ Helps families and students set academic goals and select courses and programs.
- \_\_\_ Makes families aware of the importance of reading daily to or with children.
- \_\_\_ Makes families aware of resources and programs in the community that promote learning.

#### Other Learning at Home Activities

## 4. Volunteering

Recruit and organize volunteer help from families and the community. *Please rate using the scale on the right.*

### Rating Scale

1. Never
2. Rarely
3. Sometimes
4. Frequently

#### Our School

- \_\_\_ Offers flexible volunteer opportunities and schedules that allow all parents to participate.
- \_\_\_ Has a family center or other space where families and community members can volunteer, meet, and access resources that enhance their child's learning and development.
- \_\_\_ Schedules school events at different times of the day and evening so all parents can attend.
- \_\_\_ Surveys families annually to match parent interests, talents, and availability with school and classroom needs.
- \_\_\_ Provides childcare, transportation, translators, and food to eliminate barriers preventing some families from participating in school events.
- \_\_\_ Trains volunteers so their time is used effectively.
- \_\_\_ Recognizes volunteers for their time and effort.
- \_\_\_ Encourages families, students, and the community to be involved with the school in a variety of ways (tutoring, assisting with activities, giving talks, etc.)

#### Other Volunteering Activities

## 5. Decision making

Include parents in school decisions to develop leaders and represent all families in the school. *Please rate using the above scale.*

#### Our School

- \_\_\_ Has an active PTA, PTO, or other parent group.
- \_\_\_ Includes parent representatives on the school's advisory council, improvement team, site-based management team, or other committees.

- \_\_\_ Involves parents in organized, ongoing, and timely ways to plan, review, and improve school programs.
- \_\_\_ Involves parents in revising school and district curricula.
- \_\_\_ Has parent leaders who represent the ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of all students in the school.
- \_\_\_ Asks parents to help plan and develop out-of-school programs.
- \_\_\_ Includes students (with parents) in decision-making groups.

#### Other Decision-making Activities

## 6. Collaborating with the Community

Identify and connect community resources to strengthen families, school programs, and student learning. *Please rate using the above scale.*

#### Our School

- \_\_\_ Makes staff available to help families locate and use community resources.
- \_\_\_ Works with local businesses, parks, museums, libraries, and civic groups to enrich student and adult learning and skills.
- \_\_\_ Provides parents and students with a resource directory listing community services, programs, and agencies.
- \_\_\_ Makes the school building available for community use outside of regular school hours.
- \_\_\_ Offers after-school programs for students, supported by local businesses, agencies and volunteers.
- \_\_\_ Informs and involves community members in school building and district decision-making.
- \_\_\_ Tackles funding, staffing, and location issues that may arise so collaborative activities may occur.

#### Other Community Collaboration Activities

## Discussion Questions

**Question A.** What major factors **contributed** to the success of your school's family and community partnerships this year?

**Question B.** What major factors **limited** the success of your school's family and community partnerships this year?

**Question C.** What is one of your school's major goals for **improving** its partnerships program over the next three years?

Name of person completing this assessment (optional):

Role:

for Grade level(s):

School: